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Janusz Mariański, *Human Dignity – Appreciated Virtue or Empty Phrase? Sociopedagogical Study (Godność ludzka – wartość doceniona czy puste słowo? Studium socjopedagogiczne)*, Publishing House: Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Socjologiczne, Warsaw 2019, pp. 338.

Modern society has to deal with multiple social, environmental and bioethical problems. In general there attempt to resolve these problems using scientific and technological means based on the rationality criteria, regulations and legal sanctions. This is the way of subjecting social life to the market forces and the interests of giant organisations. It is becoming less favourable for those who are for the various reason unable to demonstrate individual achievements, social relevance and other characteristics that provide sufficiently high social status and enable people to make full use of freedom and opportunities that are available in the fast changing world. In the perspective of the political and economic systems a human being is not a unique, one person of a kind any more. It is an element of the social structure that can be replaced when needed, exchanged for another one with the similar characteristics. Therefore it is more often pointed out that social order should be based on the ethical norms. They represent more reliable guarantee of the harmonious performance than purely organisational regulations. It involves the necessity to restore the former meaning of the concept of human dignity. There is more frequent recognition of the need to base the most important legal regulations on normative foundations and the fact that without reference to the concept of human dignity it is impossible to properly understand human rights.

In recent years, the issue of human dignity has become an important element of academic discourse, as evidenced by lively discussions in the field of law, theology, bioethics, international law, internal security and other research areas. At the same time, these issues are rarely the subject of sociological analyses. This is partly because the phenomena related to this concept are not directly empirically given, but are always grounded in a specific philosophical, ethical or religious world outlook. The overuse of this concept in, for example, political discourse increases the controversy over whether the concept of human dignity is too abstract or religiously marked, and whether it can be applied to contemporary culture and a modern rational legal order. The very concept of dignity in common parlance is rarely used. It functions mainly in the philosophical, ethical, religious and legal context, and therefore is often perceived as archaic and somewhat pathetic. However, if we look at the history of the concept and the discussions that are taking place at the moment, it turns out that it has lost none of its topicality; moreover, recourse to it in modern times may be more necessary than ever.

The answer to the demand for sociological analyses of social aspects of human dignity, of various ways of its understanding, of mechanisms of granting and withdrawing dignity in its moral aspect, and social structures contributing to relativisation or violation of the dignity of various categories and communities of people, is a book by the outstanding sociologist of religion and morality Janusz Mariański, entitled *Human Dignity – Appreciated Virtue or Empty Phrase? Sociopedagogical Study (Godność ludzka – wartość doceniona czy puste słowo? Studium socjopedagogiczne)*, that was published by the publishing house Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Socjologiczne. The author deals with the subject of human dignity in a comprehensive manner; it is worth recalling here that the reviewed book is the fourth monograph by this author that touches upon the issue of human dignity. Previous books were *Human Dignity as a Social and Moral Value: Myth or Reality (Godność ludzka jako wartość społeczno-moralna: mit czy rzeczywistość)* (Toruń 2016), *Human Dignity in the Social Context. Essays on the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church (Godność ludzka w kontekście społecznym)*.

Szkice ze społecznego nauczania Kościoła katolickiego (Lublin 2017) and *Human Dignity – Redeemed Value. Sociopedagogical Study (Godność ludzka – wartość ocalona? Studium socjopedagogiczne)* (Płock 2017).

The very title of the latest publication is thought-provoking concerning what dignity actually is in a contemporary pluralist culture, which promotes freedom from all restrictions, challenges norms and authorities, and promotes the relativity of all hierarchies of values. Is dignity a recognised value? On a declarative level most probably it is. The concept of dignity of a human being is not connected with any religion or worldview, and is widely accepted. Considering the variety of interpretation it remains a point of reference not only in an exceptional situation, when certain moral dilemmas must be resolved, but also in the everyday social life that would not be possible in the form we know without recognition for the dignity of other people. Such concepts as “trust”, “responsibility”, “righteousness” or “honour” are directly connected with dignity. All behaviours that make society friendlier to people, such as defending the weak, helping the needy, caring for the elderly, the sick, the disabled, opposing all forms of discrimination, taking action for social justice or protecting nature, gain rational justification only in a view of recognition of the inalienable dignity of the human person.

However, if one looks closely at how the concept of human dignity is actually applied in the context of social practices, apart from declarations, there are justified fears that it remains an empty phrase in many contexts of social life. The instrumentalisation and pragmatism of this concept by representatives of different, often contradictory ideological factions lead to “the inflation of meaning” of the concept of dignity. It has become a catchphrase full of ideology and often a last argument in various disputes on the political arena. It becomes ambivalent per se and can be used to justify any viewpoint, as is particularly evident in the discussions about bioethics. For instance, both supporters and opponents of the right to abortion or euthanasia just as gladly justify their viewpoint with the arguments concerning human dignity. Although it is referred to by the most important legal regulations at the state and international level, and dignity remains an idea that frequently appears in the declarations and messages of various parties and organizations, in practice human rights are still violated, often with the tacit consent of the self-proclaimed advocates of the human dignity. Thus this concept becomes so vague and ambiguous that it can mean literally anything; in this sense it is just a phrase, empty phrase.

Janusz Mariański’s book is a very important research work that structured academic knowledge on the actual essence of the human dignity as well as the evidence of its infringement in social sense. The author points out at the importance of bringing back the primary meaning of this concept and its proper public understanding. He also provides a specific guidance on how this concept can be put into social practice getting it out from the official declarations only. He convincingly proves that the sociology of morality is the discipline that is especially called to study the social dimension of human dignity. The author looks for the answers to the questions about what human dignity is, in social sense, as a fundamental, personality and personal value, what activities and practices may infringe it, what factors and social institutions support the values of dignity, and what are unfavourable, what are the ways to construct the sense of dignity in the individual and community dimensions.

In his analysis the author adopts Christian approach to a human being, however taking into consideration other viewpoints and different ways of explanation of human dignity. The author analyses in the sound manner various types of understanding of human dignity in contemporary Polish society and various specific indicators of its support or infringement in the social life. He emphasizes the need to undertake specific educational activities aimed at rebuilding dignity values in the social perception. In the future it will contribute to building a more human society, where there will be room for everyone, regardless of their differences. The education of children and young people in such a way that they learn to appreciate such values, and the persuasion of people to reflect on dignity as a fundamental value will allow to sensitize society to situations that offend human dignity and eliminate them from social life entirely. After all, dignity is not an unattainable ideal, distant from the practice of life, but a value that can both be recognized and also realized in practice.

The first chapter of the book is a comprehensive theoretical study of the issue of human dignity as a fundamental value. The author distinguishes here dignity of a person, resulting from humanity and

independent of human views and conduct, personality and personal dignity, which may be subject to changes depending on human behaviour in accordance with the values and norms that he or she professes. Only dignity of a person can become the normative basis for the human rights and the most general value as a basis for the social order. It initiates the principle of normative universalism: the obligation to treat another person with respect results from the very fact of his humanity, so it applies to all people without exception. Dignity of a person does not depend on any external criteria such as social relevance, personal achievements, individual (biological, intellectual) characteristics, beliefs, ethnicity, etc.

The second chapter includes various understandings of human dignity that have emerged from such disciplines as theology, philosophy, legal studies, education studies, psychology and sociology. The author presents various justifications of dignity, dimensions of its representations, paying particular attention to the sense of one's own dignity, that is, personal dignity. He emphasizes the difference between ontic dignity, understood as an inborn trait, inseparably connected with humanity, and acquired (cultural) dignity. While ontic dignity is egalitarian, personal dignity contains an element of potentiality: it can be realized to a greater or lesser extent, it can also be developed and improved, for example by improving skills and personality traits, by advocating values that are acknowledged by ourselves, by transcending personal interests and by accomplishing the social values.

The third chapter presents individual and social situations that threaten human dignity. In the modern world, human dignity is still violated in various areas of life. We can still observe phenomena such as social exclusion leading to poverty and violence, persecution due to ethnic or religious belonging, prostitution and human trafficking, drug trafficking, corruption, financial speculation, terrorism, genocide. Some of these phenomena are characteristic for the modern society and only recently it has been pointed out that they violate human dignity: environmental degradation, waste of resources, consumerist lifestyle, cause animals to suffer, indifference to the needs of elderly people who are marginalized due to their inefficiency. The subjectivity of a modern man is threatened by the "economy of exclusion" resulting from the functionalisation of social relations and the impersonality of large organizations. The analysis of cases of human dignity violation in various areas of social life, carried out within the area of sociology, may contribute to a better understanding of what human dignity is, as well as to the formulation of claims regarding the necessary changes in the social structure. The fulfilment of these claims will ensure better protection and implementation of human rights in the future.

In the fourth chapter, the author looks for the answers to questions related to education towards dignity. Still multiple manifestations of social injustice cannot be eliminated by means of *ad hoc* counter-measures of structural or institutional nature. For the real moral changes to take place in the social life, it is necessary to purposefully and intensively educate people towards the values of goodness, that is, in fact, towards humanity. Educational activities cannot be limited only to the transfer of knowledge or the enforcement of specific behaviours, but should first of all make people sensitive to morally degrading situations, to any threats to dignity that can be spotted in both our behaviour and that of other people in various social situations. One can speak of true upbringing when an individual becomes able to independently decide about the moral value of his actions based on norms, values and moral ideals recognized in his culture. This is especially important in a society that tends to reject fixed patterns of behaviour and moral codes, offering its members a vision of life without constraints and fixed rules, promoting situational ethics, permissiveness and moral relativism. In such conditions, moral education is a great challenge, because it is not easy to convince young people that the internalization of ethical principles, which derive from the concept of human dignity, does not limit self-fulfilment, but on the contrary: it helps building self-esteem, establish and maintain positive relationships with others, creating one's own subjectivity.

Janusz Marianski's book is an extremely valuable publication that fills the gap in the sociological literature devoted to the concept of dignity as an important axiological and practical category. The sociological considerations presented in the book are placed in a vast theoretical context, including sciences of a normative nature, such as ethics, theology, and Catholic social science. Taking into account the normative discourses taking place in the area of these sciences allows for a better understanding of social phenomena and processes

related to different ways of perceiving human dignity. In this way the book reveals an interdisciplinary character, and it is its special value.

The author attempts to present an integral approach to the concept of dignity, which, regardless of how it is interpreted and justified, he considers very important and useful in social life. In the field of sociology it is difficult to define this concept in theoretical sense; all attempts can only be functional, and thus show how dignity manifests itself in social life, how it functions in human actions and attitudes. It is a very interesting attempt to link this important concept with specific cognitive and moral contents. Dignity cannot be a verbal embellishment or an ambiguous concept that can be used in any context, nor should it be merely an intuitive concept. Efforts to blur this concept, to fit it into different social and political ideologies, are harmful to society as a whole. The more vague the notion of dignity becomes, the easier it is to justify all kinds of social, political or religious discrimination, as well as attempts to objectify man in the economic dimension.

Janusz Mariański is definitely in favour of engaged sociology, i.e. one that is not limited to describing the existing state of affairs. A special task here is the sociology of morality, whose task is to help people recognize moral problems and indicate the directions of changes necessary to solve them. It is impossible to understand a human being and his activities in the social world without taking into account the axiological dimension, without asking questions about the meaning and about the shape of the society where the basic values are taken into account and allow for a good, ethical and happy life as well as making choices in a free and responsible manner.

Janusz Mariański's book is an extremely valuable contribution to the discussion on the place of values of dignity in the modern society, prompting the reader to reflect critically on them and providing inspiration for further empirical research and theoretical reflection. By asking many important questions that cannot always be answered with an easy answer, he points out the areas that have been insufficiently researched by the sociology of morality. He also emphasizes the directions of its future development. Morality is a sphere of social life that exerts significant influence on the shaping of interpersonal relations, and therefore within sociology, this problems should be at the forefront.

The book will certainly be widely appreciated by everyone interested in the issue of values in modern society. It is a reliable and carefully prepared sociological study, which will surely be of interest to the community of sociologists and theologians conducting research on contemporary moral phenomena. Among its readers there can also be all those who, due to their functions, influence or want to influence on the shape of the axionormative order in Polish society by means of legal regulations, educational activities or various forms of influencing social awareness. The conclusions and guidelines contained in it constitute real practical help for all those who care about building a human-friendly society. The multifaceted look at the issues of human dignity and the moral obligations resulting from it, presented in the book, is a comprehensive source of theoretical knowledge concerning the moral condition of contemporary society and will certainly inspire many empirical explorations and theoretical studies.